

SECURITY STRATEGIES IN THE NORDIC BALTIC REGION: TOWARDS ENHANCED REGIONAL DEFENSE COOPERATION?

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The Nordic Baltic region is composed of small states bounded by the same geopolitical environment. However, despite the shared threat environment, their security outlooks and level of commitment to regional security differ as reflected in various security cooperation formats and institutional affiliations currently existing in the region.

Recent changes in the European security environment prompted Nordic Baltic countries to review their defence concepts and employ strategies to better address their security concerns. The latest developments in the Nordic Baltic defence policies reveal converging security strategies. Meanwhile, increasing bilateral cooperation between the countries of the region and the United States presents new opportunities to enhance the Nordic-Baltic defence cooperation at the regional level.

Key findings

- Nordic Baltic countries adopted similar defence policies and security strategies to respond to the new security environment.
- The Ukraine crisis renewed attention to territorial defence and shifted the main focus of defence policies back to traditional security concerns.
- The intensifying bilateral cooperation between the Nordic Baltic countries and the United States and a growing need to coordinate regional defence efforts present new opportunities for enhancing regional defence cooperation.

Executive Summary

In recent years, the strategic environment around the Nordic Baltic states has undergone crucial changes, giving a new impetus to reassess Nordic Baltic defence strategies and cooperation at both bilateral and multilateral levels. Faced with Russia's assertive actions in the neighbourhood, the Nordic Baltic countries have shifted the main focus of their security policies over to traditional security concerns and have looked for ways to boost their national defence capabilities. The increased threat environment in the region and the uncertainty of US leadership in international security create conditions for the Nordic Baltic states to intensify their cooperation, as there is a greater need to coordinate regional defence efforts.



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In many ways, Nordic and Baltic security have been separate. This was partly determined by different defence concepts and security outlooks, but also security policy priorities that were difficult to synchronize¹. For instance, Finland always had a strong focus on territorial defence, while Denmark focused more on expeditionary forces². Additionally, for the Nordics, regional cooperation in the security field was mainly limited to soft security issues as an impetus to enhance existing security cooperation involving all regional actors, including Russia. Meanwhile the Baltic countries never dismissed hard security issues and remained cautious about Russia's involvement in regional security cooperation³.

The current Nordic Baltic security strategies reflect converging security outlooks and similar defence policy choices to respond to the changing security landscape. The increased threat perception among the countries resulted in many new efforts to strengthen both national and regional security (e.g. new bilateral and trilateral agreements with the US⁴; new host nation support agreements between Sweden, Finland and NATO, significant increases in national defence spending). The growing need to coordinate regional defence efforts gives new momentum to move to a more regionalized defence cooperation format. The recent developments in Nordic Baltic defence policies demonstrate the potential to further deepen regional cooperation, with the United States serving as a catalyst for that.

Analysis

Nordic Baltic States' security needs

The Nordic Baltic defence cooperation format presents an interesting case for comparison because two countries of the region are NATO partner countries, yet all of them are small states bounded by the same geographical area and geopolitical environment - the Northern Europe region, where they face the same threat environment.

The Ukraine crisis had serious implications on the security environment in Northern Europe. Russia's assertive foreign policy demonstrated a real threat to the neighbouring states which being small, felt exposed to a significantly stronger military power. The Nordic Baltic countries are small states possessing limited defence assets. Given their size, none of them are able to maintain or ensure their security by themselves. Also, memberships in different organizations and security formats resulting from diverging security policies have complicated the situation, since not all countries have same security guarantees⁵.

There are both military and political reasons to explore a more coordinated perspective for the Nordic Baltic defence cooperation. The region constitutes one strategic space, which means that any potential security crisis in the Baltic region is likely to affect all Nordic states too. Regional defence integration would help secure the small Nordic and Baltic states against traditional security threats more efficiently by involving both Sweden and Finland, which remain outside the Alliance and cannot call on the collective defence clause. Greater regional cooperation can also offer effectiveness in terms of generating capabilities that would complement NATO efforts, and also keep continued US engagement in the region.



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Nordic Baltic Security Choices - more US and NATO⁶

A deeper look at the Nordic and Baltic defence strategies adopted after 2014 allows us to make few observations. First, recent developments in the Nordic and Baltic defence policies reveal an increased threat perception. If previously the Baltic States were mainly concerned about the conventional security threat posed by Russia, current Nordic defence strategies demonstrate similar threat perception on regional security challenges. Such a change was triggered by Russia's increasingly assertive actions, which are perceived as the main security challenge in both Europe's northeast and the High North. The evolving security environment also increased the common understanding that the security of the region is indivisible and solidarity with all countries of the region is of significant importance.

Another important development is the renewed attention to territorial defence. The Nordic Baltic countries shifted their focus to shoring up their national defence capacities. Increases in defence spending and national capabilities were given a priority in all strategic documents with the Baltics accounting for the biggest increase in military spending in the region.

The strong transatlantic link and partnership with the United States forms the most important part of the Nordic Baltic states' defence policies. Despite the uncertainty of the US role in international security under the new administration, all countries seek enhanced bilateral cooperation with the United States, which is being perceived as the key pillar of their defence concepts. Starting from 2016, all Nordic Baltic countries signed new defence agreements with the United States, further widening bilateral defence cooperation in areas such training and exercises, exchange of expertise, strengthen of capabilities and posture.

The same importance is given to NATO's role in the region. NATO constitutes an important part of maintaining stability and providing a significant level of security. Both Sweden and Finland, which remain outside the Alliance, have intensified defence cooperation with NATO, resulting in host nation support agreements signed between all parties. The agreements allow NATO to operate more easily on Swedish and Finnish soil in case of a conflict.

Recent trends in Nordic Baltic defence policies reveal the growing importance of coordinating regional defence efforts. Security strategies demonstrate incentives for increased bilateral and multilateral levels of cooperation. However, despite increased threat perception, some differences in terms of how Nordic Baltic States perceive regional defence cooperation remain. Nordic countries place more emphasis on cooperation within the Nordic format, while Baltic States underline the importance of broader defence cooperation encompassing all countries in the region. In 2015, all five Nordic countries signed a wider defence agreement to deal with threat emanating from Russia⁷. On the other hand, growing mutual understanding that the security of the broader Nordic Baltic region is inevitably linked to national security demonstrates the potential to move to a more regionalized cooperation format.

In summary, to respond to the new security environment, the Nordic Baltic countries seek to pursue similar policies in terms of boosting national defence capabilities, maintaining a strong transatlantic link, especially with the United States, contributing to NATO's collective defence efforts and stepping up cooperation with the countries of the region. All of these similarities create new opportunities to enhance defence cooperation at the regional level.



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The way forward

The current security concepts in the Nordic Baltic region provide US and NATO primacy in defence matters. All eight countries seek to keep the US actively engaged in the security of Northern Europe. This is reflected in a number of bilateral agreements signed between the US and the Nordic Baltic countries.

As we look toward more enhanced regional cooperation, the following steps need to be taken to move closer to it:

- Nordic Baltic countries need to use their present security agreements with the United States to keep its active engagement in the region, which can serve as a catalyst for a more enhanced regional cooperation.
- The Nordic defence cooperation model needs to remain open to allow Baltic countries to join Nordic defence efforts and initiatives.
- Nordic Baltic countries need to use the regional cooperation framework for generating defence capabilities (e.g. regional air defence capabilities) that would complement not duplicate US and NATO efforts to boost security and defence of the region.

Conclusion

Following the events in Ukraine, the Nordic Baltic countries began reviewing their defence policies and security strategies. The key focus of security and defence policy shifted to traditional security concerns, giving particular importance to territorial defence. As a result, countries began strengthening their bilateral partnerships with regional partners as well with the United States, which together with NATO are given primacy in Nordic Baltic defence policies. Through deterrence, NATO and the US serve important roles in improving security and stability in the region. Closer partnership with the United States and the growing need to coordinate regional defence efforts create new opportunities to enhance the Nordic Baltic defence cooperation at the regional level.

1 Imants Liegis, Airis Rikveilis, "Nordic-Baltic Security: How relevant is NATO?", in *Nordic-Baltic Security in the 21st Century: The Regional Agenda and the Global Role*, pp. 16-21.

2 Damon Wilson, Magnus Nordenman, "The Nordic-Baltic Region as a Global Partner of the United States", in *Nordic-Baltic Security in the 21st Century: The Regional Agenda and the Global Role*, pp. 67-71.

3 Dovilė Jakniūnaitė, Živilė Marija Vaicekauskaitė, 2017. *Baltic Sea Region Building: An Impossibility, or an Inability to Finish?*. In: A. Y. Andrey Makarychev, ed. *Borders in the Baltic Sea Region*. s.l.: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 103-123.

4 Since 2016 all countries of the region has signed new bilateral or trilateral agreements with the United States.

5 Claudia Major, Alicia von Voss, 2016. *Nordic-Baltic Security, Germany and NATO*, s.l.: German Institute for International and Security Affairs.

6 Analysis is based on the assessment of strategic security documents adopted by the Nordic Baltic countries after 2014.

7 Nordic nations agree on defense cooperation against Russia, Reuters, <<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-nordics-russia-defence/nordic-nations-agree-on-defense-cooperation-against-russia-idUSKBN0No2E820150409>> [accessed May 18, 2018]



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